

A Life in 70 Poems

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1935-1945

None of the poems here were actually written in the year to which they are ascribed. But they all have a link to that year. It may be a memory, a mood, or a specific event.

Where it seems useful, I have described what the link is, or the circumstances surrounding the poem's creation. Most of them come from my early 20s.

1935

The Followers

What are these hooded forms?
Mute, eyeless, towers of darkness delicately stepping,
They rose like whispers at my birth
And leaving far behind my mother weeping
Unnoticed ate my years but grew too tall,
So now I cannot see beyond at all.

Their circle never breaks. Nor could they show
Remorse or anger if they let me go.
Emotion is not needed. No escape is planned
From the gradual tightening of their iron band.
They cannot smile, or pity, or debate.
Unaware of fate, they are my fate.

1936

Rhyme

Silly boy, silly Billy,
On the dark hill.
Thunder's for company,
Rain is for thirst,

Lightning to show the path
Down to the valley,
Where rivulets spill
Limpid monotony.

Oh for my Billy boy!
Billy boy oh!
Under the apple tree,
There do not go.

There is a folk legend that children who are left under an apple tree will be stolen by fairies and replaced by a changeling. And of course you do not shelter under a tree in a storm. A deliberate attempt to be child-like.

1937

Titania

A molehill is her throne,
Green with fine moss and garlanded with webs,
Where in the noonday heat she sits,
Hardly supporting in her thin white hands
A harebell globe of frozen dew.

Leaves tumbling over
Wink in the purple sky.
A wind too tired too blow
Quietly sidles by
And hands in pockets at the hawthorn gate
Whistles a lullaby.

A smile goes drifting through her eyes,
Ruffles darkly and is gone-
The shadow sweeps across the green
Of hunchback Oberon.

1938

Little pretty bird,
Ring not your song
Like pebbles down
The well of the heart.

The nightingale and swan

Are singers both.
Sorrow and death inspire their art
But not for long,
But not for long.

For many years I did not know where the image of the bird and the well came from. Then I saw a re-issue of Walt Disney's "Snow Wife and the Seven Dwarfs" and it was obviously a memory of the wishing well scene. My parents took me to see it when I was three and it made a huge impression on me. I still think it is a masterpiece and a triumph of that cooperative art which was so typical of the time. Images from it crop up in other poems too.

1939

Nurse in dark glasses
Makes with her nails the first incision,
Snipping here and there.

O hear the horny-toed mortality
Pad upon the stair!

My eye like harvest grapes are stretched
To see into the future and the past.
But keep me from the probing kind-
Smash all the mirrors, make the windows fast.

I hope I shall go blind.

A memory of the year when I was severely ill with glandular tuberculosis.

1940

Night Fears

Small-hours creak of wooden floors.
Dead hearts.

Sounds suddenly come.

Are they leaves on the window or fingers tapping?
Shatter of glass, paralysed fingers.

Overhead, something moves,

Listlessly rasping its feet.
Birds' feet have claws. They sound like claws.
If they were lighter, it might be a bird.

Lips dusted with fever hiss at the keyhole.
Drifts of starlight cross the floor,
Bending and supplicating.

The shadows gather - don't look at their eyes.

The curtains are pulled aside.
The moon vanishes.
The shadows soak over the room.
Their faces squint from the wallpaper.
Tap-tap-tap.

Ah!

Shooting my feet to the end of the bed
They meet a toad, clammy with poison.

No. It is only a cold hot-water bottle.

1941

My Cloak

Within my cloak I draw the winds
Its folds are clouds and trees
The lining green and green on green
Runs all the rain in satin streamers.

Taut with its inner winds I hold this cloak
Its billowing curves embroidered with a mimic earth
Then quickly snap the fastening shut
And let it fall
Let all
Collapsing over
Cover me.

Outside there lies a still dark heap
But inside I am now my cloak.

By the age of five I was able to read fluently. The books I found in my grandmother's library were not at all intended for children. However, I ploughed through Sir Walter Scott and Rider Haggard and Ella Wheeler Wilcox and a number of pseudo-mystical works which gave me a great distaste for all mumbo-jumbo. The poem is about finding refuge in books.

1942

Celtic

They are not sinister ghosts
With their pale hair,
Their pale lips smiling.

They are paler than rain,
The ghosts of the twilight,
That charm the traveller
With distant songs
From bloodless lips.

Their feet murmur in the grass
And the winds blow
Through their hollow bones.

They are not sinister ghosts,
Oh no!
In the islands you may see many travellers
Who, long ago hearing them sing,
Are now old stones.

1943

Too many old songs
Recall the grey gardens
Where Ginger Rogers dances.
Her dress is white with black spots.

Slight jerkiness of head and feet
Betrays her: she should be immortal.

Darkness in the floating capsule.
The nagging throb protects, like pain.
Thousands of miles below,

The gardens drown in poisoned rain.

Difficult to explain the associations but the idea is that of a bomber pilot who distracts himself from his murderous task by humming a song. Memories of innocent pre-war musicals and the terrors of war somehow get mixed up. The dress I remembered not from the film but from a photograph of my mother pushing me in a pram on the seafront.

1944

A Panoramic School Photograph

Here we stand like organ pipes,
Shortest on the left, tallest on the right.
When the photographer tells us not to move
The machine's eye starts to revolve.
Once it has passed them,
The shortest boys run behind the group
To stand again at the far end
And have their pictures taken twice.

But these boys are not those boys, though they seem the same.
They have new doses of cunning, pride and fear within their souls.
And the one side smirks, the other stares.
The one side lurks, the other dares.

1945

Mirror, Mirror

Mirrored eyes
Aren't mine.
Mirrored mouth
That opens dumbly
Like a phantom,
I destroy you.
In the darkness
Mirror face
Where are you?
Make a pass before the mirror
To dispel reflected terror.
In its place
Another's face.
Let it shrivel up

Before you.

Around this time I was having severe psychological difficulties and the poem is about the desire to become somebody else. I was saved by a replacement teacher at school who had no training (remember this was wartime) except as a shorthand typist. She taught me the Pitman method, which kept me occupied.